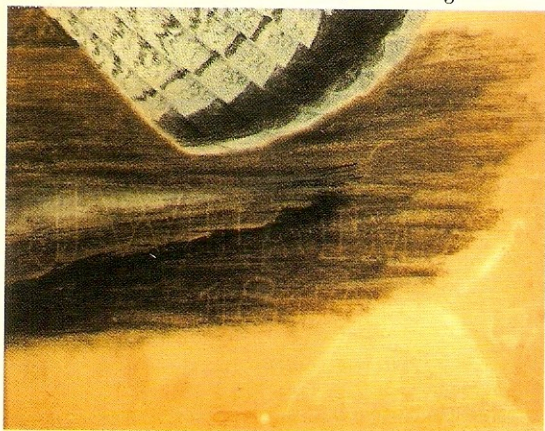


# Audubon's Untruth

**J**ohn James Audubon was a brilliant painter and a complicated man. He claimed that he was born in Louisiana and even hinted that he had French royal blood. In fact, he was born in Haiti, the son of a French sea captain and his mistress.

Prior to Audubon, Alexander Wilson dominated the world of American bird books. Wilson, born a generation before Audubon, wrote and illustrated the pioneering nine-volume study *American Ornithology*. Audubon sought to eclipse Wilson, in part by being a superior artist, and also by claiming to be the first to depict various birds. As the painting shown here demonstrates, Audubon wanted priority for picturing the American ruffed grouse.

Audubon's grouse illustration, top right, catches him in a lie. He dated it June, 1805. The



truth about this mixed-media work was known by 1931, when it was donated to Harvard by Gerrit Smith Miller Jr., then curator of mammals at the Smithsonian Institution. With the piece, Miller sent this delightful letter to Thomas Barbour, director of Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology:

This morning I turned over for packing and shipping to you the Audubon drawing that I showed you the other day. The drawing was obtained by Greene Smith from J.G. Bell to whom it was given by Audubon himself. According to Bell's story, which I can remember hearing him tell, when I was a boy, Audubon and Wilson had a controversy as to which had been the first to depict our common grouse. To substantiate his claim to priority, Audubon submitted this signed and dated drawing. After the drawing came into his hands Bell discovered that the date written by Audubon was several years earlier than the date of the watermark on the paper, as may be seen by holding the picture up to the light. Hence much hilarity on the part of Bell and my uncle, which I can also remember.<sup>3</sup>

To make sure that Audubon's damning 1810 watermark could be seen by all who cared, the illustration was framed with glass on front and back. As for the John G. Bell mentioned in the let-



Audubon illustration of *Bonasa umbellus* (boh-NAY-sa), mixed media (chalk and watercolor). Wilson illustration of same, watercolor. (Photographs used by permission of the Ernst Mayr Library, Museum of Comparative Zoology Archives, Harvard University.)



ter, he was a New York taxidermist who had accompanied Audubon on a trip up the Missouri River in the 1840s.

Miller thought the Audubon work belonged at the Museum of Comparative Zoology, together with the large bird collection of his great-uncle, Greene Smith. The museum also owned Wilson's watercolor of the ruffed grouse, shown here. (Wilson's painting is undated.) Barbour, the museum director, hung the competing grouse illustrations in his office, side by side.



3. Gerrit S. Miller Jr. to Thomas Barbour, 23 October 1931, by permission of the Ernst Mayr Library, Museum of Comparative Zoology Archives, Harvard University.

Miller's account of the argument between Audubon and Wilson is somewhat suspect. As Wilson scholar Edward H. Burt Jr. has pointed out, Wilson died some fifteen years before Audubon began publishing. Burt suggests that the ruffed grouse argument more likely occurred between Audubon and George Ord, the executor of Wilson's estate, whose dislike of Audubon was well known.

4. *Ornithoptera paradisea* Staudinger, MCZ collections.



Eric Newman &lt;ericnumis106@gmail.com&gt;

**FW: I actually saw a PA ruffed grouse yesterday in my back yard. (So did my dog, who chased it off.)**

1 message

**Dave Bowers** [redacted]  
To: "Eric P. Newman" <ericnumis@aol.com>

Tue, Aug 3, 2010 at 9:25 AM

FYI

**From:** Katie Jaeger [mailto:[redacted]]  
**Sent:** Tuesday, August 03, 2010 7:54 AM  
**To:** [redacted] Homren, Wayne  
**Cc:** [redacted]  
**Subject:** I actually saw a PA ruffed grouse yesterday in my back yard. (So did my dog, who chased it off.)

Hi Wayne:

I enjoyed reading your excerpts from the *Inquirer* article about Eric Newman's Audubon discovery, but I felt a niggling déjà vu. There was something I'd read in the past having to do Audubon and claims about grouse. This morning I found it, in a book given to me by Q. David Bowers called *The Rarest of the Rare: Stories Behind the Treasures of the Harvard Museum of Natural History*. This Harper Collins coffee-table book published in 2004 has color illustrations of neat items in the collections, with explanatory text on the facing pages. Read the attached article from p. 144, "Audubon's Untruth." Apparently the issue of grouse and illustrations was a sore point with the man. Perhaps the *Inquirer* writer was alluding to this incident when she used the phrase "typical Audubon exaggeration." None of this diminishes the importance of Newman's find: Bravo!

By the way, the *Inquirer* article you posted last week stated Audubon was 29 in 1824 (at the time of his grousy diary entry) but according to my Britannica he would have been 39 at the time.

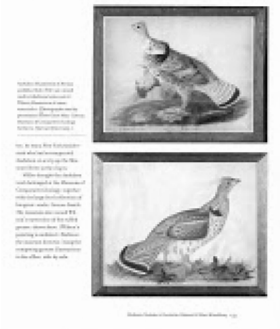
Katie

**3 attachments**

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scan0002.jpg

642K



3. Gerrit S. Miller Jr. to Thomas Barbour, 23 October 1931, by permission of the Ernst Mayr Library, Museum of Comparative Zoology Archives, Harvard University. Miller's account of the argument between Audubon and Wilson is somewhat suspect. As Wilson scholar Edward H. Burt Jr. has pointed out, Wilson died some fifteen years before Audubon began publishing. Burt suggests that the ruffed grouse argument more likely occurred between Audubon and George Ord, the executor of Wilson's estate, whose dislike of Audubon was well known.

4. *Orrhynchops notatus* Steadman, MCZ collections.

scan0003.jpg  
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